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**Reviewed by:**

**AFEHRI Representative** G. R. Akin date 5 Dec 97

**EPC Representative** Person date 11 Dec 97

**Scanner Operator** Sandy Sanchez date 11 Dec 97

**APPROVED BY:** Gary R. Akin  
GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF  
Director  
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

## TSGT SATOR “SANDY” SANCHEZ

### A HERO FORGOTTEN

Just 23 years old, TSgt Sator “Sandy” Sierra Sanchez was a Hispanic-American hero during World War II. Unfortunately, Sandy’s daring deeds have long been forgotten in the half century that has passed since he died in the hostile skies over Germany. Why his deeds have been forgotten, I have no idea. In researching his past and learning of his accomplishments, it quickly became apparent that he was a true enlisted warrior. Through this Enlisted Heritage Project, I hope to resurrect his heroic actions and accomplishments as an enlisted person, keeping his memory alive for all to remember. In revisiting his past, we will first travel back to his humble childhood beginnings. Then we will explore his career; from his prewar enlistment in the Infantry that culminated with glorious assignments with both the 8th and 15th Army Air Forces. Reconstructed now through research and eyewitness accounts, we will fly with him on his final and fatal mission. And finally, we will explore the ongoing attempts to locate his final resting place. Lets begin by finding out who Sator S. “Sandy” Sanchez was.

### THE EARLY YEARS

Born on 22 March 1921, Sator Sierra “Sandy” Sanchez grew up in the Hispanic community around Lockport, Illinois. At age 2, Sandy’s mother died from tuberculosis complicated by a pregnancy. At age 8, his father was murdered outside of a local tavern, apparently over a gambling debt. Sandy and his sisters then moved to Collins street, where they were adopted by their grandparents, Fidencio and Belen Sanchez. Sandy’s dream of flying began about this time. He often walked or rode his bicycle 5 miles to watch the airplanes take off and land at Lewis Airport. In high school, Sator belonged to the junior reserve officer training corps, and in the summer worked for the forestry service. After graduating, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, where he learned mechanics and surveying. On 20 December 1939, Sandy enlisted in the Army. Initially assigned to the 7th Infantry Division at Vancouver Barracks, Washington. In May 1941, Sandy transferred to the Army Air Corps at Moffett Field, California, as an aircraft mechanic. He was assigned to the 539th School Squadron, a unit devoted to the maintenance of BT-13 training aircraft (1). On 11 Dec 1941, the 539th moved to Merced Army Air Field, (now Castle AFB) California (2). It was here that the first glimpse of his true warrior spirit came shining through.

On 14 March 1941, Sandy was walking along the flightline towards his maintenance hangar, when he observed a “pilotless” BT-13 aircraft jump its chocks and runaway towards the crowded hangars.

Sandy quickly gave chase. His first attempt to climb aboard the runaway plane ended when the horizontal stabilizer struck him in the back, knocking him onto the pavement. Even more determined, he resumed the chase and this time managed to climb into the back cockpit. He killed the ignition, retarded the throttle and hit the brakes, but it was too late. Although he managed to steer away from the crowded maintenance hangar, Sandy couldn’t stop in time, and crashed into 2 parked aircraft. Sandy emerged from the cockpit uninjured, and for his actions that day he was awarded the Soldiers Medal; for “bravery above and beyond the call of duty.” The award was presented by the base commander, Colonel Harvey F. Dyer in early June 1941(3). This heroic act provided him the means to make his dream of flying come true, and he requested to attend aerial gunnery school. His request was approved along with news of his promotion to Staff Sergeant. With that, Sandy packed his bags and headed to Las Vegas Army Air Field (now Nellis AFB) Nevada to learn his trade as a combat crewman. Sandy was one of 325 other men of class 43-26. The build up of the American Air Forces in Europe raised a clamor by theater commanders for more aerial gunners. As a result, Class 43-26, like other classes of the time, was accelerated quickly as possible in order to fill the combat crew vacancies of the US 8th Air Force in the United Kingdom.

#### ASSIGNMENT ENGLAND

Staff Sergeant Sanchez arrived in England in mid-August of 1943. He reported to the 12th Reinforcement Control Depot, and in turn, was assigned to the 95th Bombardment Group (Heavy), 334th Bombardment Squadron on 24 August 1943(4). The 95th Bomb Group was based at Horham, Suffolk, England. By the time Sandy joined the unit, it had already flown 31 missions over occupied Europe at the cost of 33 aircraft and 363 men. If Sandy wanted a unit in the thick of it, he had come to the right place. Sandy received his flying orders on 1 September (5), and flew his first mission September 16th, as a replacement gunner for Lieutenant Alden Witt’s crew. This Particular Bomber carried the name “**Situation Normal**” in tribute of the old saying about the way the Army does things - “Situation Normal, All F----- Up”. Sandy’s demeanor and quick smile quickly made him a full fledged member of the “Situation Normal” crew.

“Situation Normal” and Crew. Horham England, 1943.  
Tail Gunner, SSgt “Sandy” Sanchez is in back row, 2nd from the left

Bombing missions quickly piled up in rapid succession. In the next 17 days the “Situation Normal” crew bombed targets in Emden, Hanau, Bremen and the Focke-Wulf assembly plant at Marienburg. The Marienburg mission impressed Sandy as “...the best bombing I’ve ever seen. almost every bomb exploded on the factory buildings.” Throughout the 8th Air Force, the 9 minute bomb run during the Marienburg raid was hailed as the “bombing of the year.” The formation managed to get 83% of their bombs within 2,000 feet of the factory. Although impressed with the Marienburg mission, Sandy would have an exceptional mission the next day. The 95th met their stiffest German air opposition up to that time, during the mission to bomb the railroad marshaling yards at Munster. Twenty B-17s started the 5 hour flight to target, much of it without fighter escort. The bombers were set upon by over 250 enemy fighters. Attacking in wave after wave, the fighters shot down all but one B-17 in the low group and left only 8 in the high group.

As Sandy later recalled "...the air was full of German planes, and my tail guns were firing almost all of the time(6)." "Situation Normal" rocked violently as a German fighter streaks by the stricken Fortress firing its cannons. Sandy then hears a chilling announcement from the bombardier, Lt. Holmes. The navigator, Lt. Harry Meintz, had been hit; his left arm has been completely shot off (7). The enemy fighters hastily retreat, as the deadly "Flak", (an abbreviation for the German words Flieger Abwehr Kanone -anti-aircraft cannon) barrage begins. The six minute bomb run must have seemed like an eternity, as the Flak grew increasingly heavy as they neared the target. Finally, the call of "bombs away" came and 102,000 pounds of bombs rained onto the target. As soon as bombs fell, "Situation Normal" turned for England. On the homeward leg, the German fighters, refueled and rearmed, set upon the formation with renewed ferocity. A Junkers 88 streaked in for an attack and as Sandy states in his combat report(8): "He was attacking the high element when he filled my small gunsight. I started firing and caught his left side and his left engine caught fire - He turned and his left wing came off (9)." Sandy didn't have time to wait long for his next victory. A Messerschmitt 109 attacked Sandy's position (10). "He was attacking B-17s coming in under us when I spotted him about 600 yards away and I fired continuously until his tail disintegrated. He went straight down. Too many fighters around to follow him farther (11)." A Focke-Wulf 190 with a black and white checkered cowling flashes by Sandy's position, passing so close to the bomber that it knocks off "Situation Normal's" radio antenna. The co-pilot, Lt. Overstreet stated he could "see the enemy pilot slumped over dead in the cockpit (12)." That day, gunners aboard "Situation Normal" claim eight enemy fighters destroyed, two probable and two damaged. Sandy also receives the Distinguished Flying Cross for "...great courage and skill...has destroyed two enemy airplanes, warded off many enemy attacks...the courage, coolness and skill displayed by Sergeant Sanchez...reflect the highest credit upon himself (13)..." For the mission, the 95th Bombardment Group received the Distinguished Unit Citation (14). Sandy flew on many other missions, but after the Munster raid they seemed to be a bit "tame." Even the "Black Thursday" mission to Schweinfurt, where 60 B-17s fell to enemy defenses, the 95th squeaked through with only one loss. It was during the Schweinfurt raid that Sandy downed another Ju-88. Sandy and his crew went on to bomb Duren, Wilhelmshaven, Rjukan Norway, Solingen, Emden and Kiel.

Sandy's original crew ended their association with "Situation Normal" after bombing the rail yards at Gelsenkirchen. The original crew of "Situation Normal" spent five days together at the Palace Hotel in Southport, England. Designated as a combat crew rest home, aircrews lovingly refer to the place as the "Flak House (15)." At the end of the five days and since some of the crew members had fulfilled their 25 combat mission requirement, they began to rotate out. Only Sandy and 4 others from the original crew came back to Horam for combat duty. Sadly, Sandy watched as his former pilot, flight engineer, radio operator and ball turret gunner board a brand new fortress for a short hop to another base where the men would catch a transport for the states. A few hours later, Sandy heard the terrible news. Flying through the overcast, the B-17 crashed into a mountain top, killing all aboard. Sandy rejoined the air war with a determination that surprised all who knew him. He quickly volunteered to fly any and all missions. Through it all, despite several forced landings and heavily battle damaged aircraft, Sandy escaped unscathed. By March, Sanchez finished his 25th combat mission and volunteered for another two months of combat. The 8th Air Force, badly needing trained aircrew members approved Sandy's request. During his second combat tour, Sandy was assigned aboard a B-17 named "**Able Mable**." Again, Sandy's characteristic smile and unchallenged abilities in the air made him welcome on the new crew. One of their first missions was the first daylight raid against Berlin (16), and the Germans were waiting. Wave after wave of Nazi fighters bore down on the American formations. A Messerschmitt 109 came around from the bombers left, and straightened out between "Able Mable" and the bomber behind it (17). Sandy explains: "...I started firing at 500 yards. It buckled as though climbing and then went down banking to the left. Then it started smoking (18)." The ball turret gunner, SSgt Kinnebrew, witnessed the enemy aircraft's propeller windmill to where it was barely turning, as the plane kept going down to earth. Sandy observed a B-17 leaving the formation on fire. Sanchez recognized the bomber as his beloved "Situation Normal." Keeping with procedure he notified the navigator, so a notation could be made in his log. Then in a quick flash, "Normal" exploded in a ball of flames, taking half of her crew with her to her death. "Situation Normal" had completed 45 missions, and 46 proved fatal.

Berlin, however, felt the might of the 8th Air Force's 1,648 tons of bombs. But, at a cost of 69 bombers and over 700 men. As a result of the Berlin raid, the 95th Bombardment Group (Heavy) was awarded a second Distinguished Unit Citation (19). Sandy was promoted to TSgt on April 15, 1944 (20), and immediately signed up to fly more missions as a replacement gunner. As a spare gunner, Sanchez was able to fly a double mission on May 8th. On 12 May 1944, Sandy, more jittery before a mission than usual, just wanted to get off the ground. The mission was to bomb the oil refineries at Brux. Army Air Force official records note that the German fighters put up "intense opposition" to the Fortresses. An estimated 430 fighters attacked, taking 67 B-17s to their deaths. Happily for the 95th, only one aircraft was lost. It ditched in the English channel, where rescue boats saved the crew. Sandy's bomber touched down and pulled into its spot at Horham, surrounded by 334th personnel. Cheers and back slappings greeted Sandy when he lowered himself from the plane. Sandy had just set a new record for the most missions flown by a combat crew member in the European Theater of operations. A grand total of 44 missions! The Squadron Commander made a brief speech calling Sandy "...a great inspiration to other airmen." In addition, a newly arrived B-17s had its nose emblazoned with a caricature of Sandy and carried the name "**Smilin' Sandy Sanchez**" and the number 44 (21). This is the only instance in the history of the 8th Air Force, where an enlisted aircrew member had received such an honor. For his amazing combat tour with the 8th, Sandy was awarded the Silver Star (22). At that time, his combat career seemed over and he soon found himself heading back to the United States.

## IN BETWEEN BATTLES

While Sandy spent a well deserved rest with his family back in Illinois, his namesake aircraft went to Berlin on 19 May 1944 (23). Piloted by Capt. William Waltman, it suffered heavy battle damage. It was forced to land in neutral Sweden, where the aircraft and crew were interned for the duration of the war (24). The crew was returned after the war, but the “Smilin’ Sandy Sanchez” was destroyed by the Swedish military. Sandy must have found his duties as an aerial gunnery instructor less than exciting. He bewildered his childhood friend, Joe Belman, when he declared his desires to return to combat. Before long, he began requesting transfers to any combat tour available. In September 1944, he got his wish.

## ASSIGNMENT ITALY

In late Sept. 1944, Sandy was ordered to Lincoln Army Air Field, Nebraska. Once there, he was posted to a B-17 unit ready to go overseas. The much decorated combat veteran, with his enthusiastic, easy going style and good humor fit right into Pilot George Sommers’ new and therefore green crew.



The Sommers' Crew. Foggia, Italy, 1945. TSgt Sanchez is in front row, 2nd from the right

On October 13, 1944, the crew boarded the ship ATHOS II and headed to Naples, Italy. At Caserta, they received orders to report to the 301st Bombardment Group, 353rd Bombardment Squadron at Lucera, Italy. The airfield was located approximately 9 miles away at Foggia. Sandy did not fly again until mid-November 1944. Bad weather often limited the number of missions the 301st could fly. To make up for this when Sandy's crew had off days, he would often fly on missions as a replacement gunner. For a fighter like Sandy, the missions must have seemed dull and uneventful --except for the flak. The 301st missions consisted of striking marshaling yards and oil refineries deep inside of enemy territory. But, the enemy fighters were few and far between. Often, enemy fighters were seen, but they refused to engage the bomber formations. As the 301st historian has recorded, not everyone got to fly as often as they would have liked, especially the gunners. Sandy's missions were limited to only 5 missions between 18 November and 11 December. Bad weather throughout the end of December and into the 3rd week of January 1945, Sandy's mission count only climbed by 10. He earned a ninth oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal (25), but still wanted more action. Once again, bad weather kept him from flying until February 19, 1945. At this point, the weather started to improve considerably, and the group began to mount more missions. Even though Sandy's crew was flying on a regular basis, Sandy continued to volunteer himself as a replacement gunner for any crew that needed one. On March 12, 1945, Sandy's crew flew against an oil refinery at Vienna, Austria. On the way, he observed another 301st B-17 leave the formation and turn back to base. Little did Sandy know he was observing the beginning of a series of events, that would have a lasting impact on him, his family, and a number of people not even yet born, to include myself. The B-17, was 1st Lt. Dale Thornton's crew winging back to base in order to save the life of a member of its crew (26). The aircraft had suffered no mechanical failure, but onboard, SSsgt Schratz, the top turret gunner was near death. Schratz, when climbing into the turret had accidentally hit the power switch for the turret before being properly in position. The turret immediately swung around, catching his left arm and parachute harness, snapping his arm in two above the elbow. Drug out of his seat, his oxygen mask was knocked off, and he couldn't reach his intercom switch to call for help. Without oxygen, he quickly passed out. The crew became aware of his condition only after he failed a mandatory oxygen check-in,

conducted every 5 minutes whenever the crew flies above 10,000 feet.

The crews quick actions saved the gunners life. But now, Thornton's crew needed a top turret gunner.

The very next day, Sandy joined the Thornton crew as their top turret gunner on a raid against the rail yards at Regensburg, Germany. 1st Lt. Leslie Tyler, the navigator, remembers "the enlisted men holding Sandy in awe (27)." With his combat record, obvious abilities and his personality, he was immediately accepted into the crew. Sandy now had the situation he wanted. He was a member of 2 different crews. The Sommers crew flew on even days, and now, because of their previous mission abort, the Thornton crew was flying on odd days. Which meant Sandy would fly on all days, weather permitting. Sandy completed his 65th combat mission on 14 March 1944. He flew with the Sommers crew, hitting the railroad yards in Komaron, Yugoslavia. Sandy was again scheduled to fly with the Thornton crew the next day. Little would he know it would be his last mission.

#### THE FINAL MISSION

The next morning, March 15th, the aircrews entered the large briefing room. A rain had delayed the mission briefing by over an hour already, and Thornton doesn't think the mission has a chance of getting off. When the intelligence officer pulled back the curtain and displayed the mission route, Thornton remembers a "stunned silence (28)" pervaded the room while the aircrews soaked up the details. The target was Schwartzheide, the last remaining synthetic oil refinery at Rhuland, Germany. Only 70 miles south of Berlin, it was over 700 miles away, right in the middle of enemy territory. It would also be the longest bombing raid ever mounted by the 15th Air Force. On the way out to the aircraft, Sandy is recalled as being quite excited about the prospects of getting a shot at one of the new German jet fighters. "Today we will see the real action (29)" he said. Serving as both the top turret gunner and flight engineer for the aircraft, Sandy set about getting the aircraft ready for the mission. As soon as the rain stopped, the radio crackled to life, "Execute Plan Abel (30)." The mission was on. One after another the aircraft lifted off and circled, awaiting the group to form up. Finally, the 301st Bombardment Group joined up with B-17s of the 5th Bombardment Wing, which in turn joined with the other wings of the 15th Air Force. In all, over 600 bombers headed north. The bomber stream split as they approached the Danube River, with the B-17 formation of some 200 aircraft droning north ward to Rhuland.

The lead aircraft experienced a malfunction and had to leave the formation. This now put Thornton's bomber, with Sandy on board, in the lead. As the formation passed the once great city of Dresden, now burned out and still smoldering from the horrendous RAF bombing, the Initial Point (I.P.) for the target came into view -the city of Bautzen. Six minutes from "bombs away" the first bursts of flak tore into the formation. Sanchez's fortress lurched to the left. "We've been hit!" Thornton exclaimed over the ship's intercom. The flak burst had blasted a large hole in the left wing, and number 2 engine was dead, and had started to windmill. The co-pilot, 1Lt. Ed Narracci, desperately attempts to feather the propeller, but it would not turn into the wind. Narracci watches helplessly as the wind milling engine speed goes off the tachometer at 3000 RPM (31). The waist gunner, SSgt Richard Lake is busy keeping an eye on the runaway engine, while the navigator 1Lt Les Tyler is busy figuring out a heading to Russian lines. Lake calls in "number 2 is smoking" and Tyler gives Thornton a heading to Russian lines, promising they would be over friendly territory in 5 minutes. Finding himself in a rapidly deteriorating situation, Thornton orders the Bombardier to "jettison bombs" and then calls over the intercom "How's everyone? Is everybody okay?" All crew members check in as "okay," including Sandy. A startled Lake then shouts over the intercom, "IT'S ON FIRE!" Thornton recalls looking over at the number 2 engine. "The propeller spun so fast, you could hear it screaming. Huge amounts of oil streamed back from the cowlings and flames were licking their way back towards the trailing edge of the wing." It was over now, the bomber was fatally wounded. Thornton sounds the bail out alarm, and attempts to keep the B-17 steady so the crew can escape. 2nd Lt. Roger McMillan, in another aircraft in the formation wrote in his witness report: "It was losing altitude, flying level, and looked under control. It started to make a left turn, but instead, it rolled over on its back and started straight down. Then it started to spin...fire coming from the...wing (32)." What McMillan saw was Sandy's aircraft in its death throes, on its back and spinning with its left wing in flames. As the crew begins to leave the stricken bomber, the navigator Tyler goes first, then the tail gunner Sgt Yovich, followed by the co-pilot Narracci. Then the two waist gunners, Sgts Taylor and Lake, and the Bombardier Rury. Thornton, holds the bomber as long as he can. He then sets the autopilot, backs out of the cockpit and drops through the front escape hatch.

Meanwhile, the radar operator, Lt. Stofko heads for the open door in the rear waist section, while the radio operator, Sergeant Marich heads forward to jump through the open bomb bay. Since not one of the crew remembers seeing Sandy since the bail out alarm sounded, it was thought he had already jumped from the burning aircraft. This however, has been determined not to be true. Sandy obviously remained at his position in the upper gun turret, manning his guns, knowing full well the dangers of what enemy fighters do to crippled bombers. With his past history of heroism, years of combat experience, and extreme coolness under fire, he was most likely waiting for the pilot and crew to bail out. After Thornton backs out of the cockpit and jumps; which, from his position in the upper gun turret, Sanchez could witness; Sandy can leave his post. Unfortunately, he stays too long. The aircraft suddenly goes into a violent spin, tossing both Stofko and Marich violently around the inside of the dying plane. When the aircraft suddenly pulls nose up, Stofko recalls he reached up and “grabbed the bottom opening of the waist door (33).” At that moment the aircraft explodes, blowing Stofko out the waist door, and Marich out the shattered waist section of the aircraft itself. An American fighter pilot, witnesses a stricken B-17 falling away from the formation and starts over its way to protect it from enemy fighters. Suddenly, a bright light engulfs it, and shattered, broken pieces fall to earth. He makes note of the time, 1410 hours. He also reports seeing no chutes, and his attention goes back to protecting the departing bomber stream. The Germans see parachutes however, and quickly capture the nine crew members that jumped from the aircraft. Stofko, hung up in a tree, is captured immediately (34). He is marched down a trail where he shortly joins Marich, who was also captured upon landing. Both are being led down a narrow dirt road when a German armored car pulls up. A German officer gets out and shows Stofko personal belongings of Sandy’s, including his wallet, identification card and some photographs. Stofko recalls the German officer asks “ Do these items belong to one of your crewman Lieutenant?” Stofko does not respond, and the German shrugs and says “it makes no difference. These items belong to a man we found dead in the wreckage. His head and legs were smashed. We buried him next to the plane.” Stofko and Marich were then led away into captivity (35). Eight days later, Headquarters 15th Air Force published an order awarding Sandy his tenth oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal.

Back in Lockport, Illinois, the dreaded Western Union telegram from the War Department arrived, stating regretfully that Sandy had been declared missing in action (36) since March 15th, 1945 (37). Six weeks later, the war in Europe was over and Thorntons crew is released. While their families rejoiced, the Sanchez family awaited Sandy's return. By October, 1945, Sandy's body had not been recovered. When all the reports from the surviving crew members were gathered together, a casualty board determined that Sandy had died that March afternoon (37). A purple heart was added to his record posthumously (39). But where is the body of this hero?

#### THE SEARCH FOR SANDY

Sandy's body has never been recovered. Some believe that a United States Army casualty team recovered his body. But since the Germans had removed his identification, his body was listed as an unknown, and is now buried in one of the American military cemeteries in Europe, as an "unknown." Unfortunately, records from the U S Army, 1st Field Command, (the grave recovery detachment operating from Berlin, in the Russian Zone of Occupation,) are "missing." Others believe he may still be buried some where near the crash site. The Russians even produced a set of remains in early 1951, claiming they were Sandy's, but an Army forensics team determined them to be "non-American in origin." After the cold war started in earnest, Sandy's case was determined by the Army to be "non recoverable" due to the deteriorating political situation. After Germany reunified, Les Tyler, the navigator on the ill fated bomber, returned to the crash site in an attempt to find Sandy's final resting place. They found no grave, but found the tail section of their B-17 bomber being used as a wall on a storage shed (40). That find, is how I get involved in the search for the missing aviator. Stationed at Spangdahlem Air Base, at the time, I was the Flight Chief for the 52nd EMS Maintenance Flight. One of the flight elements just happened to be the aircraft crash and recovery element. We were tasked by the Air Staff to assist the Air Force Museum in recovering the artifacts from Germany, and returning them to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, OH (41). On 15 March 1996, 51 years to the day they were shotdown, I had the pleasure of meeting 5 of the former crew members and recovering the remnants of their aircraft (42). While there, my 10 man team and I identified and mapped where the plane came to rest. When the

aircraft exploded, it broke into 3 main sections.

The tail section, consisting of the section from approximately the trailing edge of the wing to the tip of the tail, came to rest in a small forest on the outskirts of the German town of Bad Muskau. The majority of the left wing and one engine landed in the garden of the Hoffman family residence. The remaining bulk of the bomber crashed and burned so intensely, it literally melted into a forested hillside, approximately 550 meters from the tail section. We searched for 5 days, scouring the woods and speaking to the town elders in the hopes of finding clues that might lead to Sandy's final resting place. Two possible locations were identified, and based on those findings, the Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (SILHI,) is planning a trip to Germany "sometime in the future" to exhume two unmarked graves.

#### THEY STILL REMEMBER SANDY

Many in the Hispanic community of Joliet receive inspiration from Sandy's memory. On 17 September 1994, a local veterans group in Joliet, Illinois, successfully had a park named in Sandy's honor (43). A spokesman for the park dedication noted: "Here in Joliet we don't even have a street with a Hispanic surname, let alone a public facility. We need our kids to identify with something other than a lot of negative stuff that people identify the Hispanic kids with (44)."

Sator Sierra Sanchez Memorial Park. Joliet, Illinois. 17 September 1994

## EPILOG

For what ever reason, the accomplishments and memory of TSgt Sator “Smilin’ Sandy” Sanchez slipped away from all but a few who loved him. How could this happen? He inspired the members of the Army Air Forces beginning with his heroics in California. In England, his record setting tour of 44 combat missions flown with the mighty 8th Air Force, set many command firsts. Mandatorily made to return to the states, he harassed superiors until granted his wish to return to combat. Then off to Italy, where he again inspires others with his determination to fly and fight for the 15th Air Force. Finally, he ends his career on his 66th combat mission through a selfless act of protecting his aircraft and his fellow crew members. While they parachute to safety from a doomed aircraft, he pays for their safety with his life. This was a truly heroic act, which I believe, should have resulted in his being recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, with the entire crew being captured, and the war ending only a few weeks later, TSgt Sanchez and his story were forgotten. It’s time for Sandy to take his rightful place in our proud enlisted heritage. As I researched his career, I found that he still is an inspiration. As so many of his medal citations note, Sator reflects the highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States. The fact that Sandy must spend eternity in an unmarked grave on foreign soil is personally disturbing to me. But for his service to forget him, and the modern enlisted force to never know of his truly great accomplishments, is unforgivable.

Enlisted Heritage Project

TSgt Sator Sierra Sanchez - A Hero Forgotten

TSgt “Sandy” Sanchez

Born 22 March 1921 - Killed in Action 15 March 1945



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